



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Midewin National
Tallgrass Prairie

30071 South State Route 53
Wilmington, IL 60481

File Code: 1950

Date: October 10, 2000

Subject: Continued Agricultural Land Use-Scoping Notice,
Opportunity for Public Involvement

Dear Friends and Partners of Midewin:

The Forest Service at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (MNTP) is proposing to continue agriculture land use over the next five years. During this initial public comment period, we are providing you with specific information on the proposed project, and invite you to send us your specific comments. Enclosed is the background information; the rationale (Purpose and Need) to conduct these activities prior to the final Land and Resource Management Plan; a description of the proposed activities; and a map depicting the project area and the locations of the specific activities.

The specific objectives we are trying to accomplish are listed in the attached paper entitled: Purpose and Need.

With this letter and news media notification, we are initiating the procedures required of the Forest Service by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). We will be conducting an Environmental Assessment (EA) on the proposed activities during the next few months. You have been contacted as part of the public involvement process. Your comments on the proposed action will help complete the environmental assessment.

Please consider the following specific questions and respond to any or all of them in writing by no later than November 13, 2000.

1. Is there any information about the project area (MNTP) that you believe is important in context of the proposed activities which the Forest Service might have overlooked?
2. For you or the group you represent, what are the potential effects of this proposal that you are particularly concerned about?
3. Are there reasonable alternative ways to meet the Purpose and Need (the rationale for conducting activities) for which you would like the Forest Service to develop and analyze the environmental effects?
4. Are there additional environmental effects in addition to the ones listed below which you feel are important and would like to have displayed in the EA? If so, please include your rationale for why they should be analyzed.

We will be taking the comments received during this public input period and will consider developing and analyzing alternatives to this proposal as well as considering the analysis of other



environmental effects. We will be analyzing a “No Action” alternative as required by NEPA regulations.

One of the purposes of the analysis will be to determine if we can reach a “Finding of No Significant Impact” (FONSI) as required by NEPA regulations. If we can make this finding, the Forest Service can make a decision about conducting the proposed activities without preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As the Prairie Supervisor, I will be the deciding officer for this project.

At this time we do not believe that the proposed activities will have a significant impact on the environment, based on similar activities conducted in the past. However, we will be analyzing the proposed activities’ effects on water, air, soil, sensitive species, federally threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, and the vegetative composition of the grasslands in the area, to make a final determination.

You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the analysis we conduct, as well as the tentative decision I reach, when I release a draft Environmental Assessment later this year. My final decision, issued after that, will be administratively appealable under 36 CFR 215.

If you have any questions about the proposed activities or the Purpose and Need, please feel free to write Renee Thakali, Prairie Parklands Coordinator at the address above, email at rthakali@fs.fed.us, or call at (815) 423-6370.

Please submit your written comments by November 13, 2000 to Renee Thakali at the address above. Thank you for your interest in activities at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

FRANK KOENIG
Prairie Supervisor

attachment: Purpose and Need Statement

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie

Continued Agriculture Land Use From 2001 Through 2005

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Army leased out large acres of the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant for agricultural land uses, and when the land was transferred to the Forest Service in 1997, establishing Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (MNTP), the leases were converted to Forest Service Special Use permits. All long-term former Army leases and current Forest Service Agricultural Special Use permits will expire on December 31st, 2000. The purpose of continuing row crop production is to hold the land in a weed-free state until sufficient supplies of seeds and plants are ready for large-scale restoration to either grassland bird habitat, or native prairie plant species. The purpose of continuing livestock grazing is to manage habitat for a suite of bird species dependent on short and medium structure grasslands.

PROPOSED ACTION

We propose to continue agricultural land use at MNTP for the next five years to comply with the responsibilities and obligations outlined in PL 104-106 (MNTP establishing legislation), and to maintain grassland bird habitat and maintain fields weed-free, until seed resources are available for restoration, and a final land and resource management plan is implemented. Under this proposed action, over the next five years we will continue row crop agriculture and grazing, and begin conversion of some land uses from agricultural row crops to cool season grassland wildlife habitat or natural prairie. The cool season grassland areas will be maintained by livestock grazing as habitat for a suite of prairie birds dependent on large open grasslands, with relatively short grass length. The proposed action includes developing several wells, maintaining 12 existing wells, and maintaining and constructing fencing, as needed, to manage the livestock.

The Final Land and Resource Management Plan will determine the long-term land use for these lands. The proposed temporary land uses over the next five years will not preclude options for future land uses.

See Table 1 for a display of agricultural land use acreages and conversions that have been implemented since MNTP was established in 1997. This table also displays acres proposed for continued row crop production, livestock grazing, and acres proposed to convert from row crop to cool season grasslands, and eventually be grazed. We propose to graze 8 different allotments, four allotments on the westside of MNTP, and four allotments on the eastside. Acres to be grazed within each allotment will increase over the next five years. Total acres to be grazed at MNTP will increase from approximately 1,228 acres in the year 2000, to approximately 6,700 acres in the year 2005. We propose to gradually decrease the acres in row crop cultivation by approximately 627 acres per year, from approximately 4,413 acres in the year 2000, to approximately 2,600 acres in the year 2005. We propose that only Roundup Ready soybeans and oats are planted as row crops and that the only herbicide approved for use will be Roundup or glyphosate. Pesticide use safety and spill prevention plans will be prepared.

Tracts are selected for conversion due to their close proximity to existing grazing tracts. Tracts removed from row crop production may be planted to oats or a mixture of cool season grasses (red top, red and white clover, and Kentucky bluegrass) immediately following the last fall harvest. The tract will not be grazed during the next two years. However, the site may be mowed or treated with a prescribed burn to keep invasive shrubs and other weedy species from invading. The tracts will be added to the grazing allotment two years after planting to cool season grasses.

Why Do This Now? These actions are necessary because livestock grazing maintains habitat structure (short grass height) for sensitive bird species, specifically the upland sandpiper and loggerhead shrike, and also benefits a guild or suite of birds that require short grassland habitat. Grazing also helps control invasive plants from becoming established. Haying and mowing will not result in the same type of prime habitat for sensitive birds.

Why Row Crops? We have an obligation to continue agricultural land use and gradually phase out this land use out over the next 15 years, consistent with the intent of MNTP establishing legislation. We don't have a large supply of locally grown native grass seed to plant or restore large acres. We presently only produce enough seed to restore 50 acres per year. Native prairie seed is scarce and expensive. Continued row crops will maintain the tracts in a weed-free state until we are ready to restore grassland or prairie.

General Conditions of Special Use and Grazing Permits:

- Agriculture land use at MNTP will be authorized using either Forest Service grazing permits or special use permits. Terms for special use permits for row crop production will be for 5 years, with the permittee having right to renew on an annual basis, and with the Forest Service right to annually reduce acres under permit. Permitted crops will be Roundup Ready soybeans, with a rotation to oats after 4 continuous years of soybeans.
- Terms for grazing permits will be for 5 years with the permittee having the right to renew on an annual basis, and the Forest Service has the right to increase acres to be grazed on an annual basis. We propose to graze at least 1 ½ cows per acre from April 1st to September 30th. It is proposed to mow and hay approximately 76 acres (tract 205) to maintain bobolink habitat on the west-side of MNTP.

Award of grazing and special use permits will be on a competitive bid basis, pending final Forest Service NEPA decision to continue agricultural land use over the next 5 years.

ISSUES, CONCERNS, AND OPPORTUNITIES - Based on previous agriculture use, scoping completed in spring, 2000, and monitoring resource conditions at MNTP.

- Concern regarding pesticide safety and use, monitoring nearby streams, wetlands for contamination by pesticides.
- Concern that cultural/historical sites may be within project areas that may be lost or destroyed.

- Concern that grazing will damage streams and other wetland resources.
- Concern that grazing may affect Henslow's sparrow, Northern Harrier, Bobolink
- Failure to crop these areas until adequate supply of seed and plants is ready may result in infestation and establishment of noxious weeds.
- Concern that number of cattle is not too high and that areas are not overgrazed.
- Opportunity: Leasing brings money to FS and county.
- Opportunity: Farming provides cover for the land, and food for animals, and prevents brush and weedy trees from invading future prairie.
- Concern that trampling from grazing may damage individual Sullivant's coneflower plants, a Regional Forester Sensitive Species. Large populations are present at many grasslands at MNTP which have a long history of grazing. This species HAS persisted and reproduced under long history of grazing. Grazing may possibly benefit the SPECIES, reducing competition from taller plants, allowing more light to basal leaves.
- Concern that decreasing or stopping grazing may affect Upland Sandpiper population at Midewin which is by far the largest in the state and one of the most significant in the Midwest region.
- Loggerhead shrike population at Midewin is relatively large and may be the last fully migratory population of Loggerhead shrikes in the US range of the subspecies. Area had long history of providing large stable acreage of grazed pastures. Concern that Short periods or reductions in grazing may significantly diminish these two populations.
- Opportunity: Grazing also benefits Grasshopper Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolink, Dickcissels.
- Concern that Removal of cattle from low quality wetlands may allow phragmites, common reed, purple loosestrife, and reed canary grass to invade and dominate these wetlands, creating additional hurdles for restoration.

Table 1: Agriculture Land Uses: Historic, Current and Proposed (Acres)

Land Use	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Hay	1103	941	375	76	>76*	>76*	>76*	>76*	>76*
Alfalfa	173	230	376	120	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Livestock Grazing	5038	3111	873	1227	4087	4310	5145	5761	6722
Row Crops	6774	5272	4978	4413	4155	3574	2613	2613**	2613**
Row Crops converted to Wetland or Prairie	0	216	473	157	53	29	N/A	N/A	N/A
Row Crops converted to grassland for 2 years in preparation for grazing	0	488	577	475	340	581	961	**	**

Notes:

* Tract 205 is maintained in hay annually to support Bobolink habitat

** Row Crop Acreage in 2004 and 2005 subject to change. Row Crop conversion to grasslands for grazing would be determined by the Prairie Plan.

Row Crops acreage includes corn, soybeans, oats and wheat

Row Crops conversion to Wetland or Prairie for 2001 and 2002 is subject to available funding.



